I.L. Caragiale – Theatrical Anticipations

Anca-Doina CIOBOTARU[**]

Key-words: *theatre, vanguard, text, sign, performance*

Nowadays, the concept of analysis in the art of stage performance, seen from the perspective of the *sign* value of the theatrical language, is quite natural to us, no longer a novelty. Going back in time, however, could offer the opportunity of a re-evaluation of the anticipatory dimension of Caragiale's theatrical philosophy. The theme of Caragiale's vanguard was analyzed especially from the point of view of the theatrical structures, leaving aside the author's preoccupations with the relationship between text and theatrical life (on stage and beyond), between aesthetics and the ethics of art. The present matter was the reason of our reassessment of late 19th century theatre when I.L. Caragiale was launching a question, which for a long time used to be a controversial subject: "Are plays proper literature?"[1], creating the opportunity of discussing again the established hierarchy between the theatrical language elements. In an *avant la lettre* manner and resulting from a profound understanding of the stage act, the playwright underlined the necessity of setting up some precise and objective relationships between the theatrical language elements, word, image and action on the stage. We take the word as a tool for performance creators as a possible key to the understanding of the never fading contemporary character of his scenic vision, which is placed under the sign of a novel and dynamic approach to the performance.

This first point in the present study incidentally comes from the author's biography as well as from the controversies that still exist around his work. Seeing nothing as mere coincidence, but as a possible sign from Fate, let us remember that 1852, the birth year of I.L. Caragiale, is also the opening year of Teatrul cel Mare (The Great Theatre) in Bucharest, called since 1875 Teatrul Național (The National Theatre). At the beginning, the legislation comprised forms of censorship that should not be neglected:

---

[*] Simpozionul Național „I.L. Caragiale azi. Vitalitatea operei", organizat de Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide" şi de Asociația Culturală „A. Philippide", Iași, România, 12 iunie 2012//The National Symposium "I.L Caragiale Today. The Vitality of His Literary Work", organized by "A. Philippide" Institute of Romanian Philology and "A. Philippide" Cultural Association, Iasi, Romania, 12 June, 2012.

[**] The University of Arts "George Enescu", Iași, Romania.

[1] The article appeared in *Epoca*, on the 8th of August 1897.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

> To play on the stage of the Great Theatre, Millo or Pascaly had to place guarantees – many thousands of ducats – and always take the commitment of not staging political plays. (The theatre was under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and later under the Ministry of Culture and Public Instruction[2]). While the French and Italian opera or operetta performances and melodramas met the tastes of the high class audience, the government forbade Matei Millo to stage his satirical couplets and even proceeded to arrests when, in the theatre occupied by the police force, Millo went on with his anti liberal and anti conservatory couplet, *Old clothes or political rags* (Caragiale 1957: 6–7).

The legislative changes that took place[3] after the Independence War created the necessary premises for a constant and organized activity, in Bucharest, Iaşi and Craiova.

Starting from this reality in which young Caragiale worked as a clerk and later on as a journalist, and also considering the direct contact with the theatre world due to his family connections, we can shape a perspective that allows the understanding of the approach he took in his writings on the theatre – which have had an unfair place in the shadow of his plays – works where he identifies different aspects of the stage, covering everything from critique to theatrical theory, not being satisfied with creating for and within his times, but attempting to re-shape the vision of his contemporaries. In his opinion, it was only natural for both the critique and the chronicler to have a respected status, born from objectiveness and understanding of the theatrical act, to the progress of the *institution*. But the actual reality of his time was different from his projections. Here it is a short, but acid radiography of "the simple facts":

> Regularly any journalist benefits from free entrance and almost anytime of a free seat in a theatre, as well as entrance to some special events where, depending on how popular and important the newspaper in question is, he would even benefit of a free box.
>
> Then a journalist finds an open door to all the theatre rehearsals, and is also allowed to go backstage and onstage, where he finds himself in the midst of so many temptations.
>
> Let us not forget that usually the journalist develops close friendships with actors, actresses and especially theatre producers whom he often accompanies to dinner parties after the performance – there, as in the theatre space, he gets his free seat; and after the party he might be entrusted with the delicate mission of protecting the honor and reputation of some actress, accompanying her home… A systematic corruption of the press people by the theatre people (Caragiale 1957: 128–129).

Going beyond the everyday worries of the journalist of the period, the author provides themes that are present in the world of the theatre to the day: the morality and objectiveness of the relationships within the reception and promotion of the performance art. His preoccupations with the media are doubled by those related to

[2] The transfer was decided by the Royal Decree for passing all theatres under the jurisdiction of the Culture and Public Instruction Ministry, no 195/30 August 1867, published in the Official Monitor.

[3] Among the legislative acts issued after 1877 we mention: the Law in Romanian theatre organization and administration No 76/6 April 1877 and the Regulation regarding the Romanian theatre organization and administration No 146/29 June 1877, reformulated on March 1910.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

playwriting and theatrical theory, everything in a coherent sequence in the article cycle entitled *Literatura în teatrul nostru* (*Literature in our century*) (1878). The theatrical repertoire issue represented "an important matter" that concerned equally those who composed the repertoire and the dramatic artists, starting from a point of view that was very clearly defined,

> of matching the pieces with the forces you have… Drama is an art of perfection, therefore it has a special aim, a beautiful representation. You have to reconcile this aim with that of the playwright; you must never subordinate it. Only on that condition can you fulfill your artistic calling and accomplish the purpose of art. Choose the pieces you can rely on presenting yourselves in the best possible way and don't ever let a single moment of doubt enter your mind: throw away an exceptional drama that you cannot perform at least respectably and take up an extremely poorly written farce that you can perform splendidly.
>
> A theatre where actors play well is the real theatre, and not the theatre that stages good plays[4].

Thus, in 1896, Caragiale was drawing attention to the importance of the relationship between repertoire, casting and stage performance. The idea reaches an official form in 1897, when Spiru Haret, as Minister of Culture, supports the necessity of a harmonized repertoire, the development of the vernacular drama, the use of quality translations. Caragiale raises aspects that are still surprisingly up-to-date in the theatre organization, as the casting which has always been an issue due to the vanity and bias that overshadow so often the stage creations. Beyond these interests, we can notice the writer's concern for the audience, for their education in the spirit of recognition of real artistic values. The question of making the best of every actor's potential of expressiveness and the vernacular repertoire is analyzed in the context of a vision on the performance focused on the integration in the art world as a whole, on syncretism and stylistic unity, having a rigorous and architectural structure:

> Like music, theatre presents a great resemblance to architecture. The role of the playwright and that of the musician is similar to the architect's design: they minutely describe a construction – a rational conglomerate of materials. But whilst the architect's construction stays as one, fixed and longlasting, and its repetition is possible because the materials are inert – the constructions of the playwright and of the musician are built under direct attention and, when repeated, are always different, because the materials are soulful. […] Consequently in theatre, the art of performing has all the more importance when its construction materials are distinct human souls, and not rock and wood. In architecture stones will sit upon each other having a prop and placed under a certain weight that must not surpass their resistance – in other words a steady balance. On stage the human souls have to move; the power of the construction consists in an unsteady balance (Caragiale 1957: 144–145).

At a time when the modern Romanian theatre was under restoration, Caragiale sensed things in a European, vanguard rhythm, placing the actor in the centre of the theatrical art – *sum-sign*, in a complementary relationship, and not a subordinating

[4] Caragiale 1957: 142 – the quotation represents an excerpt from the article *Something on Theatre*, published in *Epoca*, 13th December 1896.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

one with the *text sign*. This way, with dynamism and objectiveness, he answered those who took part in this process and would evade the specific character of national identity, but also the importance of the emotional factor in the reception equation: theatre "has to be alive, warm and burning!" (Caragiale 1957: 336).

These aspects allow us to justify his anticipatory, vanguard position and to re-evaluate a controversy started (in the late 70's) by Alexandru Piru, published in the volume *Valori clasice* (*Classical Values*):

> The most recent studies about Caragiale – *Caragiale şi începuturile teatrului european modern/Caragiale and the beginnings of Modern European theatre* (1974) by I. Constantinescu and *Caragiale sau vârsta modernă a literaturii/ Caragiale or the modern age of literature* (1976) by Al. Calinescu emphasize especially the modern character of the playwright and the prose writer and the fact that the author of the *Scrisorii pierdute/ Lost Letter* and of *Momentelor/Moments* is as Alfred Jarry (with his *Ubu Roi,* 1888) a forerunner of Ionesco and Becket, a visionary theoretician of his time and a contemporary to us. Although the proofs in favour of this thesis are worthy of consideration, they do not annul the former reception of Caragiale as a *classical* writer – also in the sense of endurance that this word carries […]. It has been forgotten that the classical writers are so, precisely for their modern and up-to-date character, for they are able, due to their apprehension of the universal and eternal human nature to arouse interest and to be perpetually assimilated (Piru 1987: 205–206).

Classical versus modern: a theme that compels us to take the responsibility of affiliation to certain conceptual delimitations. In this context, we put forward the definition of the concept of vanguard proposed by Ioan Constantinescu:

> Without looking for a paradox by all means, one might say that the vanguard has the calling of permanency, be it just for the fact that it doesn't approve of cessation, stagnation, that is death. It cannot be but an instinctive revelation, a learning of the forgotten models that claim at every instant to be rediscovered and rejuvenated. The vanguard has always happened as a come-back: Classicism to Antiquity, Romanticism to Middle Ages, Surrealism to Romanticism etc. (Constantinescu 1974: 124).

Instinctive discovery, creative intuition or capacity of foreseeing things: the power of being one step ahead of the time? The answer can be subjective and circumstantial; definite sentences can be restrictive; open re-evaluations can generate new prospects of understanding and exploitation of his work. In fact, the controversy referred to the dramatic texts, the created characters, the poetic language, although the analytical approach initiated by Ioan Constantinescu dwelt on Caragiale's vision of the performance, both from the perspective of assumed influences and of reception.

> The most important contribution that really makes Caragiale a *new theatre* precursor is the refusal of a literary theatre and the creation of a theatrical theatre. Almost all the other ideas, attitudes, modalities and new (or brought back to the present) dramatic proceedings of the playwright converge to that tendency (Constantinescu 2004: 18).

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, placed European performance under the sign of the quest – it was a quest for the meanings of theatralisation and re-theatralisation. Caragiale chose to refuse the limitation of the dramatic/literary text:

> Re-theatralising the theatre is the same with its emancipation from the domination of literature, it means to conceive it as a visual art, a art of synthesis, an autonomous art, and to reconsider the role of the word in theatre (Constantinescu 2004: 16).

The vision of theatralisation and also "the stylistic exercises" that are characteristic to Caragiale's writings, make us plead for the idea that the relationship with Alfred Jarry's troubling and provocative world is not a strictly temporal one: the writings on theatre, the interest for the question raised by the convergence of the theatrical language elements, place the author of *Ubu King* and the *Almanach* on the same level with the author of *Calendarul Moftului Român* (*Calendar of Romanian Whim*). The game of definitions goes beyond the linguistic field and turns into the authors' revolt, an attempt of counter-reflection of a world placed at the confines between reality and fiction. *Argumentele despre teatru* (*Arguments for Theatre*) offers examples that can be used as arguments for our presentation:

> THE PLAYWRIGHT, AS ANY OTHER ARTIST FINDS HIMSELF IN THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH, but there are so many truths. And as the first discerned truths were considered to be false, it is very likely that the theatre of recent years has discovered – or created, which is all the same – more new points of eternity (Jarry 1969: 89).

> Maintaining a tradition – even a valiant one – means to atrophy the thinking that changes into duration, and it is useless to express new feelings in an old form (Jarry 1969: 95).

We could go on with examples; from both perspectives, the text – *support sign* of the whole architectural construction of the show – gains meaning and expressiveness only when its identity is accepted.

> Drama is a *constructive art* whose material is the conflict between people because of their natures and their passions. The elements involved in the process are precisely the vivid and immediate event of these conflicts (Caragiale 1957: 146).

Literary speech is born from adopted theatrical poetics, but also from the used stylistic expressions by which it takes over the "discursive" speeches of the time, as metaphorical chronicles.

Beyond these aspects, there is another area still not enough analyzed: the various offers for the staging of Caragiale's work. Dramatic theatre represents just the classical version; the encounter through radio drama, dance theatre, animation theatre or film adaptation can equally induce emotional states. The list is long, but for illustration we will refer to those related to the academic environment (involving the participation of actors and directors engaged in research and didactic activities from the vocational field). In Iaşi, Caragiale's work is apparently inciting to pursue:

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

TVR Iaşi broadcast the puppet show *O noapte furtunoasă* (*A stormy night*)[5]; his short stories and moments were staged both in "Luceafarul" Theatre (Iaşi)[6] and in television shows. On the stage of The National Theatre of Iaşi, *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A lost letter*) dropped the words in favour of the actor's body expression and of the force of the pantomime expression[7]; *Primăvara Artelor* (*The Spring Art Session*) invited the audience of Iaşi to *Discurs despre putere* (*A speech on Power*), based on texts signed by Alfred Jarry, I.L. Caragiale and George Calinescu[8]; the opera *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A lost letter* – composed by Paul Constantinescu) was included in the teaching of specialty classes. We can also see these performances as a possible revenge in time of Caragiale's incomplete directing project in Iasi. The approach of vocational university education to Caragiale's universe is justified precisely by the vanguard orientation and the architectural construction of his writings; the created imaginary triggers fantasy, the acidity draw a parallel to the human defects (the generally accepted ones and those who are timeless), and the structures recognized as classical make way to new approaches. Thus, the anticipatory projections can extend not only to Alfred Jarry, but also to Gordon Craig, thanks to the search for the relationship between character and the modality of identification found in the motion rhythm and the force of body expression; everything seems to be a quest through the characters' entrails, through the intimacy of their thoughts. Actually, the theatrical space proper to the ideology of the three servants of Thalia mentioned above, are populated with masks and character typology placed at the frontier between mask and identity. The projection of characters into definite, but surprising actions, the verbal automatisms, the explanatory instructions, the sharp articles, written with a belief in the high purpose of theatre, the preoccupation for the exploitation of the ancient theatrical art (pantomime, fair theatre, itinerant theatre, folk theatre with masks or puppets) – all of these lead to an aesthetics centered upon stylization and over-measure, specific features of the animation theatre.

The availability of Caragiale's characters to come to life with the help of puppets, is nowadays the subject of numerous specialty studies; what is significant to us is to emphasize the role of the marionette masks proposed by the playwright in his writings (in *Moments*, in *Short Stories* and in comedies as well). The mask characters and the carousel conflicts open a view that makes the texts become mere pretences that enable the elaboration of some acting schemes to help the director

[5] The show was taken over by the University of Arts "George Enescu" – Iaşi, directed by Natalia Dănăilă, director assistant Anca Ciobotaru (2002).

[6] On the stage of this theatre different theatrical techniques were combined (collages, animation, dramatic acting combined with animation art). The texts of Caragiale became alive in shows like: "Vizita" (1967, script and direction of Constantin Brehnescu), "Mofturi la Moşi" (1975, Natalia Dănăilă's script, director Constantin Brehnescu), "D'ale Caragialelui" (1994, script and direction of Bogdan Ulmu), "Steaguri, oale, flaşnete" (2004, Mircea Radu Iacoban's script, directed by Constantin Brehnescu).

[7] The show was produced in 2006, on the stage of The National Theatre of Iaşi – directed by Adi Aftene. The show is also mentioned in the volume Oprea 2011: 143–144.

[8] The show was made in 2012, within the theatrical season of the University of Arts "George Enescu", Iaşi – adaptation of texts and direction by Anca Ciobotaru.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

develop extra-scenes, but also highlight the multiple sides of the relationships between characters. Texts like *Moşii* (*Table of Contents*), *Cum se înţeleg ţăranii* (*How peasants get along*), *La poştă* (*At the Post Office*) are all alike in the way they send vibrations that remind of futurism, but also of the absurd theatre; the word games are an invitation to visual and sonorous scenic images, where the characters – comic or grotesque masks – consume the farce conflicts they are trapped in. The author goes beyond the power of understanding of his contemporary readers, and those who really understood "that those who witness an act of creation destined to make a change in the daily rhythm, will be too few". That must have happened when *Moşii* (*Table of Contents*) appeared in *Moftul Român* (*Roumanien Trifle*), a text that was defying the canons of the text itself, of the orthoepic and of punctuation signs, but rich in visual, acoustic and olfactory images. Either you read it or listen to it, the text brings you in the middle of the fair; you feel the need to watch out and guard against the crowds, you see the characters all around you and at the end of it you just have to wipe away your sweat and smooth out your clothes. It also invites one to create, by the collage technique, an imaginary show from a real show. A purposeful and revolutionary mess meant to wake up the audience from that serenity specific to the Gates of the Orient: rich, provocative, abounding in scenic images and theatrical metaphors" (Ciobotaru 2011: 27). In the spirit of a consistency of assertions, we notice that the author's vanguard originates from his openness to go back to the Ancient or medieval roots of the comedy, reformulated by him in such a manner that resonate to the present time, its people and places. These aspects are connected to the specific structures of the animation theatre, but also to the modern way of writing.

The restless quest, the disquietude of a vision that placed him in the middle of so many polemics (generated also by his will to find solutions to everything that theatrical life implied, from dramatic writing to institutional organization) make us link Caragiale's personality to the vanguard and trail blazers category for what we call today *the beginnings of the modern European theatre*, but also to *those restless ones* of the theatre, for whom the work is under the sign of aesthetics and ethics as well.

Bibliography

Caragiale 1957: I.L. Caragiale, *Despre teatru***,** Simion Alterescu (ed.), Bucureşti, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură şi Artă.

Călinescu 1985: George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române*, Bucureşti, Minerva.

Ciobotaru 2011: Anca Doina Ciobotaru, *Texte şi pretexte scenice*, Iasi, Artes.

Constantinescu 1974: Ioan Constantinescu, *Moştenirea modernilor*, Iaşi, Junimea.

Constantinescu 2003: Ioan Constantinescu, *Caragiale şi începuturile teatrului european*, 2nd edition, Iasi, Editura Universitas XXI.

Jarry 1969: Alfred Jarry, *Ubu*, trad. Romulus Vulpescu, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură Universală.

Oprea 2011: Ştefan Oprea, *Prin teatre şi prin ani*, Iaşi, Editura Artes.

Piru 1978: Al. Piru, *Valori clasice*, Bucureşti, Editura Albatros.

Silvestru 1979: Valentin Silvestru, *Elemente de caragialeologie*, Bucureşti, Editura Eminescu.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)

Abstract

The idea of an analysis of the performance art from the perspective of the *sign* value of the elements of theatrical language is common now. Going back in time, however, can give us the possibility of a reassessment of the anticipatory dimension of Caragiale's theatrical vision.

At the turn of the century, Caragiale forwarded a question that has long been a controversial issue: „Can drama be called literature?". One step ahead of his time, having a profound understanding of the stage act, the playwright underlined the necessity of establishing clearcut and objective relationships between the elements of theatrical language, word, image and stage action. We take the word as tool for performance creators as a possible key to the understanding of the never fading contemporary character of his scenic vision, which is placed under the sign of novel and vivid approach to the performance.

BDD-A1066 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:05 UTC)